

ONLY IN NEWSDAY

## On this Easter, 'Miracle Larry' celebrates life after COVID



Sayville native Larry Kelly briefly opened his eyes on Easter Sunday 2020, after weeks in a coma battling COVID-19. Doctors gave him little chance of survival and his family had been called to say their goodbyes. Those around the country who came to know his story through social media called him "Miracle Larry." Credit: Brittainy Newman; Danny Kelly; Photo Credit: Kelly Family

Doctors gave Sayville native Larry Kelly, one of New York City's first COVID-19 patients, little chance of survival. He spent 51 days in a coma and on a ventilator.

But on Sunday, Kelly will celebrate another Easter after recovering from near death.

His wife and daughter had been called in to say goodbye to him in March 2020, and they were asked how long he should be kept on life support.

Then on Easter Sunday 2020, Kelly briefly opened his eyes. It was the start of what medical personnel describe as a seemingly inexplicable recovery.

To hundreds of relatives, friends and others around the country who came to know him through social media and rooted him on, he is "Miracle Larry."

“What happened to me is not supposed to happen,” Kelly said. “I do believe that I was helped by some supreme being. Being raised Catholic, I can only describe that as God. But there was definitely a spirit.”

Two years later, Kelly, 66, is grateful to still be alive this Easter Sunday.

He is thankful to his family, to his doctors and nurses, and to a group of lifelong friends from Sayville High School who prayed for him and helped pay for his long road of rehabilitation once he got out of the hospital.

Kelly, a three-sport varsity high school athlete in wrestling, baseball and soccer, is a retired teacher and supervisor in the New York City public school system. There, Kelly developed a program in which he and his team taught suspended high school students for up to three months, with the goal of returning them to their regular school.

120 days of treatment

Kelly spent 128 days in the hospital and rehab. It was the height of a pandemic that had turned the city into a grim global hot spot, with refrigerated trucks holding the dead when morgues overflowed.



Larry Kelly and Jessica Montanaro pose for a portrait outside of Dive Bar on Manhattan's Upper West Side on April 8. Credit: Brittainy Newman

The day he left, 150 supporters gathered outside a rehab center on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, where he lives, with signs and face masks saying, “Miracle Larry 128 Days.”

He was pushed down the sidewalk in a wheelchair past his favorite hangout, The Dive, a bar that had become a gathering spot for supporters rooting for him to beat COVID. A handmade sign was hung on the front window: “Let’s Go Miracle Larry.” It’s still there.

He told reporters he was convinced the prayers were critical to his recovery, and that “my wife saved my life. She wouldn’t let them pull the plug.”

Kelly was a rare bright spot amid the worst pandemic in a century.

Today, the medical workers who treated him are still stunned he survived.  
Nurse stunned by decline

Jessica Montanaro, the nurse who admitted Kelly to the trauma ICU at Mount Sinai Morningside hospital near Columbia University, said he arrived on March 17, 2020 — St. Patrick’s Day — tanned from a vacation in Florida. He was struggling to breathe, she said, but was able to communicate and didn't look too sick.

Two days later, after she returned from a day off, he looked “half-dead,” she said. “I remember being just in complete shock,” she said. “I’m a trauma nurse, I run the ICU clinically, I have seen people sick like that, but not in two days, from what he looked like when he arrived.”

“I remember being stunned, going like, ‘Is this what COVID does?’ ”

Montanaro was one of the medical workers who told Kelly’s wife, Dawn, and one of his two daughters, Jackie, on March 28, 2020, that he was close to death and gently asked what they wanted to do about the life support that was keeping him alive.

“If you were to look at him as an outsider you’d go, he looks like he’s dead. He wasn’t moving. He wasn’t interacting. You could go in there and flip him on his stomach and jab him with a needle — there was no movement,” she said.



Larry Kelly's sign outside of Dive Bar on Manhattan's Upper West Side on April 8. Credit: Brittainy Newman

Today, she is mystified though joyous that he survived. She, Kelly and their families have become close friends.

“He is a miracle, truly. He’s really one of the rare success pieces that we have,” Montanaro said. “He has been one of the biggest hopes and bright spots in, I call them the hell weeks, the first two months that were really the most hellish in New York City in our ICU.”

High school buddies help

Two months ago, Kelly visited the hospital workers who helped save his life.

“I’m crying, thanking them all across the board for never giving up on me,” Kelly recalled. “They’re crying, saying, ‘Mr. Kelly, you’re the reason we kept going.’ Which sort of blew me away, made me cry even more.”

The other group that helped pull Kelly through were his Sayville High School buddies who have stayed close since graduating in 1973.

Dr. Jack Cush, a Dallas rheumatologist who still has a home in Sayville, has known Kelly since kindergarten. He called the hospital almost daily to get updates on Kelly and offer suggestions for his care.

Cush regularly sent Montanaro and her beleaguered staff lunches, dinners, salads, pizzas, sodas, ice cream — to both thank them for their work and to keep the line of communication open. Some delis wouldn't deliver orders even as high as \$200 because they were afraid to enter the hospital, Cush said.

He kept Kelly's Sayville buddies informed around the country, from Portland, Oregon, to San Diego, Kansas City, Tampa, Atlanta, and Washington, D.C. They, in turn, sent word out to their network of contacts.

As Kelly's case gained attention on Facebook and other venues, prayer groups popped up around the country. The All Saints Episcopal Church in Beverly Hills devoted one Zoom service to praying for Kelly to live. A leading member there, Colleen Dodson, had once directed Kelly — a part-time actor and the author of an Off-Broadway play about the 1919 Black Sox scandal that premiered in 1986.

"It shows the power of prayer," Kelly said. "There were so many people."



Sayville native Larry Kelly spent 51 days on a ventilator and in a coma as one of New York City's first COVID-19 patients in 2020.  
Credit: Kelly Family

Cush and the Sayville group joined intensely in the prayers Easter weekend 2020 when Cush — based on reports he got from the hospital staff — was convinced Kelly was about to die.

“It was bad,” Cush recalled. “If you seize for six hours in a row, you could fry your brain. He’s seizing for almost a week in a row. He’s got brain bleeds” along with swelling of the brain.

Massive amounts of drugs were keeping him alive, Montanaro said.

But the day after Cush told the group to brace for Kelly’s imminent death, Kelly briefly opened his eyes, on April 12, 2020, nearly a month after he entered the hospital.  
Slow comeback

Kelly had been moved to a makeshift ICU in Mount Sinai. When a nurse there told Montanaro the news, she was dumbfounded.

“I’m like, no way. I didn’t believe it. I really thought he was going to die,” she said. That day in New York City, 573 people died of COVID-19.

Kelly slowly started coming back, and by June was transferred to a rehabilitation center on the Upper West Side.

He was still in bad shape. He could not eat for weeks since he had lost his swallowing muscle with the breathing tube down his throat for so long. He needed speech therapy to learn to talk again.

A major triumph occurred when he was able to walk seven steps with a cane.

After his return home that July, the long slough of rehabilitation continued. When his insurance would not pay for any more therapy, his Sayville buddies stepped in and paid for his therapy for all of 2021.

Today, Kelly is almost his former self — a charismatic, wisecracking New Yorker with an infectious laugh and opinions about everything. He and a partner have written a screenplay about his back-from-the-dead experience.

He still has some problems. He has a constant tingling feeling in his hands and his right foot, which he had to retrain to walk.

But he considers those minor inconveniences and is savoring every minute he is alive.

This Easter, he and his wife will visit their daughter, Jackie, in Buffalo. It will be a special gathering. Both stood by Kelly during the bleakest moments, convinced he would somehow pull through.

And Kelly recalls the final text he sent his wife before going into the coma: “I promise I’ll never stop fighting.”

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